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ABSTRACT

The history of grammar instruction includes two approaches: the handbook approach, which is practiced today, and the textbook approach. The handbook approach focuses on rules for correct writing and is an error-based view, while the textbook approach would treat grammar holistically and interpretively and would systematically explain new concepts in light of previous ones. If grammar is to survive in today's classroom, it will need to return to the textbook approach. One current example related to the textbook approach envisions a creative, activity-based classroom, but asserts that no theory should be taught. Knowing grammar in a holistic and theoretical way, however, cannot be a harm to student writing, and studies are showing benefits of heightened awareness of language on student composition. Contains 15 references. (EF)

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The Place of Grammar in the Language Arts Curriculum

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There are in the second half of the Twentieth century, two competing views of the subject known as "grammar." In one view, which could be termed the "errors-based view of grammar," *grammar* is synonymous with *rules for correct writing*. It is rules to follow and errors to avoid. However, this is an extremely limited and prescriptive idea of grammar, and, ironically, not a particularly accurate view at that. It is also the cause of much of the collapse of grammar among students and teachers. In the more holistic view, grammar is seen as *the study of language, in particular one's own language, to look for the underlying principles and patterns that make language work*. It is this view that is the older and, in an important sense, the more *traditional* understanding of what this subject is all about. But grammar today has become overshadowed by the "errors-based view" that we find now in almost every handbook.

Robert J. Connors traces the historical process by which grammar became gradually more narrow. He traces the gradual narrowing and fragmenting of a once holistic school subject:

> In 1907, Edwin Woolley's Handbook of Composition reduced the system of English grammar to a series of prescriptive error-based rules. . . . Woolley's Handbook was not a grammar treatise of the old sort; as he said in his preface, "The aim of the book is not scientific, but practical. The purpose is to make clear the rules in regard to which many people make mistakes. No material has been put into the book for the sake of formal completeness." (Connors, 12)

This is a description of grammar limited strictly to utilitarian ends. It is not, Connors points out, the original concept of traditional grammar:

> A far cry from the aims of traditional grammarians from Lowth onward, but Woolley defined here the sort of "grammar" that would henceforward be most people's

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> definition: a set of rules about words and sentences that define mistakes as perceived by an English teacher. (Connors, 12)

The result of this reductionism is described by Connors. It is a picture of a subject that has fallen into decay and disrepute:

> "grammar" in English became the strange amalgam of buzzwords, legends, handbook nostrums, half-understood transformational concepts, and decayed eighteenth-century prescription that most of us know today. (Connors, 22)

The extent of decay and ill-repute that grammar has suffered may be seen in the handbooks, many of which treat their own subject, grammar, as an irrelevancy and a nuisance. In this passage, grammar is described as a non-subject, except as relates to error correction:

> If you never make mistakes with sentence structure and punctuation, then you don't need to know the difference between a simple and a complex sentence or the difference between a main clause and a subordinate clause. After all, you don't need to be a mechanic in order to drive a car. But if you sometimes make errors in sentence structure, then the terminology in this section will help you to diagnose your problems and correct them. You can then be your own mechanic. (Stewart, 206)

When this error-based approach began to take over, when the grammar book became an error book and "not a grammar treatise of the old sort," we lost something valuable in education. I would like to describe this change in terms of a contrast between two approaches, what may be called a *handbook* approach, as we have today, versus what may be called a *textbook* approach. Grammar handbooks are based on decidedly poor sentences intended to illustrate errors; they are not based on a study of prose models from classic authors, as at one time they were. Handbooks are short on the explanation, reasoning and the questioning why behind the topics that they cover; they are peremptory and dictatorial. They do not present grammar as a *system*, but rather as a catalogue and sub-division of error types. Each error is taken separately, with no context in the larger knowledge of grammar. Hence, grammar handbooks are notorious for filling their explanations with terminology that is just as problematic as the question itself. A *textbook*, on the other hand, would treat the subject holistically. It would systematically explain new concepts in light of the previous. A good textbook is an *interpretive*, not a dictatorial treatment.

If grammar is to survive in today's classroom, it will need to return to the textbook approach. Grammar must be treated along the analogy of other school subjects like chemistry, biology, or mathematics, all of which treat the material in a textbook, not a handbook approach, as fully developed subject which involves unique cognitive skills, concepts, and interconnected ideas.

The shift from a textbook to a handbook approach was historically devastating for grammar. This shift opened the door for an ongoing attack against the position of grammar within the total school curriculum. Constance Weaver has collected a summary of the published attacks on grammar in this century. This litany, based on clinical studies done in classrooms, proclaims the complete uselessness, even disadvantage, of formal grammar as a means to improve writing skills. The historical timeline shows a correlation between the advent of the handbook approach and the beginning of the attacks shortly thereafter. Perhaps the attacks are justified as far as the handbooks are concerned, but have inadvertently done damage to the earlier, more traditional grammar as well.

In addition, one should note the stated limitations of Constance Weaver's argument. She does not reject grammar, only the method that teaches it through an understanding of the theory. She and her school wish to replace the formal approach with a completely practical, activity-based classroom grammar. Hence, they are by no means anti-grammar; rather they should be termed *new-grammarians*. Weaver's own book is called Teaching Grammar in Context. Ironically, she produces something much closer to a grammar textbook than any handbook available today. This group of teacher-researchers simply envision a more creative, activity-based classroom. Insofar as this gets us involved with sentences I, as a traditionalist, actually agree with them. With their core argument, that no theory should be taught, however, I do not agree and will address my reasons.

The attacks that Weaver quotes are damning, but her own argument actually pulls back from this position a considerable distance. Note the series of concessions that Weaver is forced to make in the course of her argument. She begins with a rejection of formal grammar, but eventually allows "that we limit our teaching of grammar and grammatical terminology to only those features that will be most valuable in helping writers eliminate errors and increase the effectiveness of their sentences" (104-105). At this point we have gone from rejecting theory to allowing it within limits. A series of concessions eventually follows, including

- The recommendation that we not try to teach grammar as a complete description of the structure of English (except, perhaps, in an elective course or unit), but instead

that we focus our teaching on those concepts and terms that are most helpful in discussing sentence expansion, revision, and editing.

- The suggestion that we focus instructional attention on those aspects of grammar that are particularly helpful in creating, rearranging, and revising sentences for greater stylistic effectiveness.
- The suggestion that we also attend particularly to those aspects of grammar that are most critical in helping students punctuate sentences conventionally.
- The suggestion that while a few basic grammatical concepts may be taught in separate language lessons, such concepts should generally be taught and reinforced as students are revising and editing their writing. (Teaching Grammar in Context, 181)

In spite of the clinical studies, knowing grammar in a holistic and theoretical way cannot possibly be a harm to student writing. All of the classic authors in English grew up on a thorough knowledge of the subject. Grammar certainly did not do Jane Austen, or Emily Dickenson, or Abraham Lincoln, or Winston Churchill any harm. But they did not study grammar from an errors-based point of view. Writers like these are educated in sentence structure and word morphology in a comprehensive way, and it is a disservice to deprive our students today of a similar awareness. In addition, the new-grammarian criticisms are not really directed at the eradication of grammar; they are directed at getting students involved with language in a more genuine way than any handbook can provide. The question, even for the critics, is not "should we teach grammar;" the question is *how* should we go about doing this.

The new-grammarians advocate guided activities that increase sentence awareness. Their methods include imitation, sentence combining, and a host of other creative activities with sentence level composition in the classroom. The new-grammarian vision of an activity-based classroom is a cogent vision, and one that incorporates our modern understanding of the learning process. However, I would like to argue against Weaver's vision in so far as it rejects theory. We can have Weaver's vision of the active classroom while still employing a grammar curriculum that is theoretical and systematic, spanning the K-12 years.

Why is active avoidance of grammar theory necessary? It is impossible to avoid it altogether, as Weaver herself admits in her concessions. It would be a more comprehensive and holistic approach, a more *textbook* based approach, to set up a K-12 grammar curriculum based on underlying theory, and use that as a framework for designing the activities. The theory behind the error is, in fact, the more interesting, valuable, and

educational dimension of grammar. For example, in dealing with verbs, a typical handbook would define them as action words and perhaps distinguish between several types such as "linking" and "auxiliary." Then, almost immediately, it would move to verb *errors* such as agreement, split infinitive, shifting tense, and so on.

This process circumvents the whole theory behind the English verb. It omits the more significant definitions such as "infinitive" and "finite" being, as any student will readily acknowledge, time-related terminology. "Infinitive," meaning "not related to time," is the state of the verb in its pure or abstract form, not actually occurring in the sentence. Grammarians have called the infinitive "the name of the verb," and accordingly, the infinitive can act as a noun. "Finite," of course, relates to time; it describes a verb actually taking place in the sentence. This is why a finite verb must have one of the three tenses, past present or future. Other aspects of verb theory are also substantial. The verb transformations in English are utterly formulaic, for example from the infinitive of "to count" into a tense form such as the progressive: "was counting," "am counting," "will be counting." The formula is "('to be' + time form) + present participle of 'count.'" The handbook approach omits other things, such as parts of speech that are derived from, and related to, the verb, such as the participle and the adjective:

> In all the languages we know, and probably in all others, there are three sorts of attributives, which are called in the grammars, Adjectives, Participles, and Verbs. – The Adjective denotes a simple quality, as brave, cruel, good, swift, round, square. – The Participle denotes a quality, together with a certain modification of time; as loving, which relates to time present, and loved, which alludes to time past. The Verb is still more complex than the participle. It not only expresses an attribute, and refers that attribute to time, past, present, or to come; but also comprehends as assertion; so that it may form, when joined to a noun, a complete sentence, or proposition. (James Beattie, 1760)

Instead of rejecting theory, we should develop a systematic, comprehensive approach to K-12 grammar that is founded on grammar concepts but also capitalizes on the new-grammarians' activity-based classroom. We can let a textbook view of the subject determine the curriculum, and then fill up the day to day classroom with new-grammarian activities.

In this paper I have cited the clinical classroom experiments in only a brief way. I had no desire to repeat the condemnations of grammar. However, recent clinical experiments may cut the other way. Studies are starting to show what heightened awareness of language can

really do for student writing. Here is one example:

> In Australia, a number of teachers . . . have found in controlled experiments that the simple quantity of what ten-year old children write increases dramatically after spending some time looking at one of the many ways in which sentences are structured. . . . It may not matter much what they look at, as long as their attention is on sentence structure. In the U.K. . . . a secondary school teacher . . . reports that some of his weakest students benefit "dramatically" from an exploration of simple, compound and complex sentence types. He supplies models and the students produce further examples . . . . (Hudson, web source)

Searches in ERIC are turning up more and more experimental articles that show good results from specific classroom activities. Formal grammar offers the teacher many activity based classroom exercises, which also provide for structured, concrete, testable lessons. Students respond eagerly to growing awareness of their own innate language abilities, and take very well to the rationality of this subject, not to mention the specificity of "correct" answers in the English classroom.

A return to a holistic, theory based grammar textbook would, in fact, be a return to grammar in its authentic form. Martha Kolln (president of the NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar) presents us with a picture of traditional grammar which was never, in its original form, the narrow and prescriptive presentation of errors:

> We think that students should be capable of thinking about and discussing their language. We think that writers who have a vocabulary for talking about sentences, the various structures and their functions, will have greater control over composing and revising, control over their style. ("Miss Fidditch," 4)

Geoffrey Nunberg gives the same picture of traditional grammar. It comes across as a humanistic, engaging discipline. Grammarians *deduce* their parts of speech, from evidence, examples, and definitions presented; they argue and defend their categories by a process of reasoning in which our students today also begin to participate. The picture in this quotation is not one of an oppressive, reductionist set of errors:

> Fowler's article is a model of the traditional grammatical method. He begins by acknowledging the problem, and then addresses it with arguments from precedent and analogy, being careful to distinguish between the grammatical questions that lie within his brief and the political questions that lie outside it. As in all good homilies,

> it is the method, not the text, that matters; read Fowler on this and you will have an idea of how he might come at a wholly different problem. (Nunberg, web source)

Nunberg shows that, in its original form, grammar was never the dry, dogmatic subject that we have inherited from the handbooks:

> The point of traditional grammar was to demonstrate a way of thinking about grammatical problems that encouraged thoughtful attention to language, not to canonize a set of arbitrary rules and strictures. (Nunberg, web source)

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Robert Einarsson Home Page. Contains my conference paper, "The Philosophical Roots of Traditional English Grammar," along with several historical readings.

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